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## A matter of trust: shadow education in Taiwan

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## Introduction

- 1 Taiwan was referred to for centuries, especially in the West, as Formosa. It is officially recognized as the Republic of China, renowned for its breathtaking natural scenery, and its fast economic development. In the last century, this growth earned it a position as one of the four Asian Tigers, alongside Hong Kong, Korea and Singapore (Chou and Ching, 2012).
- 2 Taiwanese society has been heavily influenced by Confucian values, such as political authoritarianism, social structure, human network, and education (Yao, 2000). Consequently, Taiwan's society places much emphasis on credentials and the practice of examination systems. The latter originated from imperial China, a period that lasted for more than one thousand and thirty years (694–1895). This system was used as a tool for social control by the ruling class by selecting intellectuals for the governing class through public examinations. Up until now, Taiwan's society is still under the influence of this examination tradition, which requires a great deal of hard work via drills and practices. Most Chinese/Taiwanese parents are convinced that effort matters more than innate ability if their children want to improve their school grades (Hwang, 2012; Stevenson and Lee, 1996). Consequently, schools in Taiwan prioritize effort, persistence, and rigidity, which requires more time studying (Zhou, 2000).

## Taiwan's education system

- 3 Taiwan's education system comprises six years of elementary school, three years of junior high and senior high school, and four years at the tertiary level. The first nine years have been compulsory since 1968, and this will expand to 12 years in fall 2014. Going to

secondary school is one of the most challenging periods in a Taiwanese student's life. The reason is that although Taiwan has nine years of compulsory education, students need to sit qualifying examinations for admission into senior high schools or vocational high schools. This process is repeated again before entrance into universities or colleges. Preparation for entrance exams is the main source of pressure in schools. To achieve a higher score in their senior high school or university entrance exams at the end of ninth and twelfth grade, students tend to stay in school for "extra classes" until as late as eight or nine at night.

- 4 It is obvious that this education system is one of the most important socializing agents for Taiwanese youth. Like many of their Asian counterparts, Taiwan students spend a large amount of time in schools, sometimes from early childhood to their early twenties. The typical long school day represents the Asian educational philosophy that a lengthy school day and/or school year will enhance time dedicated to learning, and eventually result in higher learning achievement and test scores (Ellis, 1984; Gettinger, 1984).
- 5 In Taiwan, like in any other Asian society, parents invest most of their savings into students' education, whether it is on cram schools, additional and private tutoring, or extracurricular activities. Thus, the higher the social and economic status of the family, the higher the education expectations (Chou and Yuan, 2011). According to Stevenson and Baker (1992), Japanese students tend to have greater opportunities for university if they are from more privileged backgrounds and receive more cram schooling. Unfortunately, it is also the case in Taiwan that family educational resources, coupled with cram-school education, will enhance students' access to higher education (Chou, 2008a).

## Shadow education: cause and effect

- 6 Shadow education, also known as "cram school", is the preparation for an imminent examination in a more intensive way, or studying a subject hastily (Chou and Yuan, 2011; Bray, 2009). In other words, cram schools are specialized social institutes that prepare student for tests in a more efficient and marketable manner (Huang, 2004).
- 7 According to a survey, an average high-school student spends half of his or her day on attending school and cram school (Chou, 2008b). Most high-school students engage in school-related activities (including exam preparation) at the expense of their personal life. In addition, many ninth- and twelfth-graders will attend intensive cram schools for drilling so they will score higher in entrance examinations (Chou and Ching, 2012). 84 percent of students enrolled in cram schools are from elementary and junior high schools.
- 8 Cram schools are generally divided into the traditional *buxiban* and *anchinban* (commonly known as daycare centers). Except for some talent-building classes, most *buxibans* are geared toward instruction and test for subjects taught in regular schools, whereas *anchinbans* look after a group of children for homework and assignments before parents pick up them up.

## Cram school: a profitable or remedial institution?

- 9 Since the mid-1990s, Taiwan's Ministry of Education (MOE) has launched a series of education reform programs in an attempt to reduce examination pressure and enhance students' creativity. However, these changes did not succeed in lessening students' stress, but led to an increase in the number of students attending cram schools. For example, Taiwan had only 5,891 registered cram schools in 2001, but, unexpectedly, the number has more than tripled in a decade, with 80 percent geared towards exam-subjects classes (Government Information Office, 2010). Cram schools in Taiwan are proliferating. The number of cram schools is determined by market demand. Therefore, the higher the demand of the general public, the greater the opportunity for cram schools to flourish.
- 10 The reasons behind the boom in Taiwan's cram schools are as follows (Chou and Yuan, 2011; Huang, 2004; Hsu, 2002):
- Supplementary instruction tends to raise students' academic performance and test scores;
  - The overvaluing of credentials has created an enormous amount of pressure on exam-driven learning;
  - Parents are very concerned with their children's academic performance;
  - Some public schools cannot satisfy students' academic needs;
  - There is a gap between the students' learning and what is tested in the entrance exam.
- 11 On the other hand, as a group-orientated society, students, who are under pressure to adhere to social norms, overestimate the value of cram schools and thus follow other students blindly. On average parents in Taiwan pay approximately NT\$ 2,640 (US\$ 80) per subject per month for their children to attend cram schools. These fees may run up to NT\$ 7,920 (US\$ 240) per month, which causes a financial burden for every single household in Taiwan (Chou and Yuan, 2011).



- 12 As a matter of trust in Taiwan's education, there is no doubt that shadow education or cram schools have made some contribution to supplementary education in Taiwan, both in the academic-oriented and the non-academic-oriented spheres. The prevalence of cram schools has created challenges to education administrators and parents, who have expressed mixed feelings about this profitable educational industry. If cram schools are so prevalent, why are public schools unable to fulfill the academic needs of these students? A *buxiban* is not a free ride; it charges a lot of money and places a financial burden on parents. If the existence of cram schools in Taiwan is unavoidable, how can the quality of public schools be improved? How can a student's entrance exam pressures be lessened? How can parents be convinced that their children should not be overloaded and could excel in other areas? Last but not least, how can shadow education complement regular schools in a more constructive way? These are questions yet to be answered in Taiwan.

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## INDEX

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**Geographical index:** Taïwan

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Chuing Prudence CHOU (周祝璣) received her Ph.D. in Comparative and International Education from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and is a professor in the Department of Education at National Chengchi University (NCCU), Taipei, Taiwan. She has been a visiting professor for research and teaching on Fulbright and other programs in several universities (Miami, Harvard, Auckland, Toronto, Hawaii, Beijing Normal University, South Normal University in China, etc.). Her research interests include comparative higher education, education reforms in the global context, and education issues in the People's Republic of China. Chou has written and edited numerous publications in Chinese and English. Her book entitled *The Great Experiment of Taiwanese Education: 1987-2003*, is a well-known and widely-cited publication in Taiwan. In another book, *Taiwan Education at the Crossroad: When Globalization Meets Localization* (2012, Palgrave Macmillan), she proposes a new paradigm which attempts to promote mutual understanding and peace among nations of conflicts via educational exchanges. In her newly edited book, *The SSCI Syndrome in Higher Education* (2014, Sense Publishers), Chou confronted the issue of why the rise in emphasis on publications indexed in the Thomson Reuters' ISI citation in Asia has become a global and controversial phenomenon. Email: [iaezcpc2007@gmail.com](mailto:iaezcpc2007@gmail.com)